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January 22, 2010

The Honorable Ian A. Bowles, Secretary
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
Attn: MEPA Office – Richard Bourre, Assistant Director
100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02114

Re: Urban Ring Phase 2, EOEEA #12565

Dear Secretary Bowles:

Thank you for your December 16, 2009 letter granting the Massachusetts Department of Transportation's (MassDOT's) request for an extension of the deadline for this letter. In the spirit of accountability, respect, and innovation that is a hallmark of the recently-launched MassDOT, this response will clearly state our capability and intent with respect to the Urban Ring Phase 2 project (the Project). Since the receipt of your letter, MassDOT has reached out to the impacted communities, the Urban Ring Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), and other stakeholders who are involved in the Project. This letter reflects much of the input received as a result of those discussions.

MassDOT intends to proceed with aspects of the Project following a three-part strategy: (a) the implementation of bus rapid transit (BRT) service in high-value segments of the Urban Ring in a manner consistent with the recommendations of the November 2008 project proposal; (b) the pursuit of other BRT elements, such as the MBTA's ongoing Key Bus Routes initiative, as part of a coordinated strategy of achieving BRT levels of service on other routes in the corridor; and (c) continued planning, analysis, and civic engagement for the full Project as an integrated system. It will not surprise you, however, that given our current financial constraints and competing priorities, MassDOT cannot proceed with the implementation of the full Project at this time. These facts, when coupled with the detailed requirements of the MEPA process, require that I conclude that ongoing MEPA review is no longer appropriate for the Project at this time. Accordingly, this letter suspends any further MEPA review on the Project and withdraws the Project from the Special Review Procedure.

Urban Ring Concept and Background

As you know, the concept of a circumferential rapid transit line in the Urban Ring corridor dates from at least as far back as the landmark Boston Transportation Planning Review of the early 1970s, when the Project was proposed as a means to increase the effectiveness of our entire transit system. It is a testament to its worthiness that the concept has endured over the last 40 years, and is continually pointed to by stakeholders and transportation advocates as an important project that has the potential to link dense neighborhoods, employment centers, and major educational and medical institutions with the existing MBTA radial transit system and with each other, while at the same time relieving congestion on the core of the transit system. Over time, the original concept has evolved into the Urban Ring circumferential transit system, which includes the Project.

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We can also acknowledge that the Patrick Administration has made significant progress, and over the past three years has advanced the Project's planning, technical analysis, and stakeholder consensus to a point where a path to implementation can finally be seen. An alignment for this concept was proposed in a November, 2008 Revised Draft Environmental Impact Report/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (RDEIR/DEIS), and expanded upon in a June, 2009 Notice of Project Change (NPC) submitted to your office. While more work in this area is needed, significant consensus on important, discrete segments of the Project has been achieved.

Your November 6th letter asked that MassDOT clarify its intent with respect to the continued review by MEPA of the Project, and requested that MassDOT file an updated NPC not later than March 31, 2010. In preparing this response, we have taken time to carefully review the entire record, and we have met with the CAC (twice), the leaders of the "Compact Communities" of Boston, Cambridge, Brookline, Somerville, Everett and Chelsea (three times), the Federal Transit Administration, and with representatives from the Medical Academic and Scientific Community Organization, Inc. (MASCO), staff from A Better City (ABC), and representatives of business and institutional members of ABC.

Current Status

As you noted in your letter, circumstances have changed in recent months. The Project was not included in the financially constrained long-range Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) that the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) recently released, and which the federal government has now approved. The RTP includes all transportation projects in the Boston Region that can be built with anticipated revenues between now and 2030, including a number of public transit expansion projects. We are pleased to now have an approved RTP for the region. Despite MassDOT's best efforts to accommodate at least some significant component of the Project, the Boston Region MPO was not able to include any portion of the Project in the document. The MPO did, however, signal its support for the Project by including it in a list of "Illustrative Projects" included in the RTP. Certainly, inclusion in the Illustrative Projects list demonstrates the Urban Ring's consistency with the Boston Region MPO's transportation planning principles. The Project is also consistent with Commonwealth transportation policy, which supports transit projects that are expected to have strong ridership and which promote sustainable development.

The status of the Project in the RTP can come as no surprise to anyone who is closely monitoring the pressures on the Commonwealth's transportation finances. Certainly, these pressures have been well documented in several reports issued over the past decade. These include the two reports of the non-partisan Transportation Finance Commission (www.eot.state.ma.us/default.asp?pgid=content/tfc_contact&sid=contact), and, most recently, in the "MBTA Review" report that was published on November 1, 2009 by David D'Alessandro and his team (www.mbtareview.com/).

The so-called D'Alessandro report, prepared at the request and urging of Governor Patrick, provides a sobering update on the financial and physical state of the MBTA. It urges a high-level examination of safety and capital projects (a review that is now underway), a slowing of system expansion, and more oversight before any new MBTA debt obligations are undertaken. The conclusions of the report mandate that we focus on making significant progress on the MBTA's large backlog of "state of good repair" projects, estimated to cost nearly \$3 billion, and on stabilizing the operating deficit at the MBTA. MassDOT is committed to doing so.

Need to Continue to Move Forward

Despite these challenges, MassDOT recognizes that continued transportation planning, civic engagement, and implementation of early action improvements within the Project corridor are essential for our transportation system. Too many people have worked too hard for too many years, the Project has too many potential benefits, and the needs are too great to simply put the Project on the shelf for another generation to dust off. Indeed, our analyses show that, if current trends are left unchecked, both the Green Line and the Red Line could be operating over capacity during the peak hour by the year 2030.

MassDOT is therefore committed to identifying and implementing BRT improvements or bus enhancements that provide valuable transit service and capacity within the corridor in the near term, and can be built in a way that is consistent with ultimate implementation of the Urban Ring vision. While the financial reality requires us to focus on near-term improvements, MassDOT is also committed to continue planning for the Urban Ring as a single, contiguous corridor and Project – a concept that has been strongly and unanimously endorsed by the Compact Communities and by the CAC. This planning is made all the more important given the Commonwealth’s imminent purchase of important rail assets from CSX and the continued progress that MassDOT is making on the reconstruction of several of the vehicular bridges within the Charles River basin. Both of these investments have the potential to shape how we implement project-related improvements.

However, further meaningful environmental review of the high-cost elements of the Project as a whole is premature. Again, the Project is not in the Boston MPO list of projects anticipated to be built in the next 20 years, and the MBTA and the Commonwealth are facing the extreme financial challenges. We therefore cannot devote, and we cannot ask EOEEA to devote, scarce additional staff and financial resources to continual environmental review of a Project that is so far off in the horizon that meaningful assessment and evaluation of its environmental impacts are difficult, if not impossible, to fully ascertain.

For these reasons, this letter will confirm that MassDOT is suspending further MEPA review on the Project and is withdrawing the Project from the MEPA Special Review Procedure. Despite these actions, we acknowledge that the Project remains subject to MEPA jurisdiction. Because of the support we have for the concept and for the other reasons stated in this letter, MassDOT requests that MEPA and the Compact Communities consider the Project in their respective reviews of development in and around the Project area.

In addition, MassDOT intends to continue advancing the goals and specific elements of the Project according to the following plan:

1. With MEPA’s consent, MassDOT will ask the members of the CAC to continue assisting us with planning for the improvements outlined in this letter specifically, and with the planning and implementation of transit improvements in the Project corridor more broadly. Assuming that they are willing to continue to serve, the CAC members will bring a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by transit investments in the corridor, and a demonstrated commitment to advocating for these investments. MassDOT plans to convene a meeting to develop a work plan for CAC participation and other civic engagement going forward.
2. Similarly, we intend to continue to work with the Compact Communities, both individually and as a group, on MassDOT initiatives within the Urban Ring corridor, including coordination on

preserving alignments for potential future transit improvements. MassDOT and its predecessors have had a long partnership with the Compact Communities on the Urban Ring, and MassDOT's expectation is that this relationship will continue. Given their jurisdiction over development and institutional master planning, the Compact Communities are best equipped to work with institutions and private developers to preserve right-of-way that may be required for eventual Project implementation. MassDOT will assist the Compact Communities in this effort, and, as noted above, we also urge your office to facilitate this through the MEPA process.

3. Consistent with the objectives of both the CAC and the Compact Communities, MassDOT recognizes that the Urban Ring is a concept that is worth preserving. Therefore, we intend to plan for it and conduct the public process for it as a single, integrated initiative. MassDOT will maintain a long-term project team for the Urban Ring, to be led by a designated Project Manager. Scott Hamwey in the Office of Transportation Planning has been assigned to this role. Even if the Project can only be accomplished over time, it is important to pursue discrete, worthy elements, each with their own independent utility and, to the extent required, subject to appropriate and necessary MEPA review in accordance with MEPA's guidelines and state law.
4. MassDOT will undertake planning that builds upon past Urban Ring analysis and current bus system initiatives (such as the Key Bus Route Initiative and the Silver Line Direct Connect service) in order to identify initiatives that will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the MBTA's bus system within the corridor. By undertaking this strategy we will allow feasible early actions to move forward at as fast a rate as possible, and can avoid the slower rate of progress that may be necessary on other elements of the Project.
5. MassDOT will support Massport's design and construction of the East Boston Haul Road in a manner that supports BRT service. MassDOT will also work with Massport, the MBTA, the City of Boston, and the City of Chelsea to extend BRT service from Logan Airport and the Blue Line via the East Boston Haul Road to Chelsea as soon as possible, thereby providing early implementation of one of the Urban Ring's critical connections.
6. To the extent that our resources allow, MassDOT will support the advancement of other Urban Ring corridor BRT improvements aimed at increasing service in a similar manner, such as the City of Boston's Melnea Cass Boulevard project. Where appropriate, other elements of BRT service will be pursued on routes in the Project corridor, including signal prioritization, queue jump lanes, new and/or enhanced bus shelters, and improved customer information. Federal High Priority Project funds have been earmarked for some of these projects. MassDOT will submit notice to MEPA of advancement of Project elements, and will, at the appropriate times, work with MEPA with respect to whether any further environmental review is necessary, given the thresholds and impacts of the Project as a whole. MassDOT will also meet with the Compact Communities to establish a joint list of early actions by all state and municipal parties.
7. MassDOT will continue to engage with stakeholders and undertake coordinated planning on many of the longer-term, high-cost elements of the project, including, for example, the Fenway/LMA tunnel. The planning and conceptual engineering work completed on these Project elements is extensive; given the long-term nature of the implementation of these projects, any further engineering or design work would be of highly doubtful value. This fact, coupled with the extreme financial constraints we are facing, precludes any further expenditure on such engineering or design work at this time. We will, however, devote design and engineering

resources to issues that arise due to particular development concerns within the Project corridor as the need arises.

Conclusion

The Urban Ring corridor continues to represent many of Greater Boston's greatest opportunities for economic growth, and is already home to several critical employment districts. As these areas continue to develop and in order for them to reach their full potential, improved access through public transportation must be advanced. Although MassDOT's current financial condition prevents it from building the Project in its entirety in the foreseeable future – and the MBTA's current financial condition makes it financially unable to operate it – should circumstances change, we are prepared to revisit this conclusion. Until such time as the environment for funding expansion projects improves, MassDOT will continue to focus on opportunities for making meaningful, achievable improvements in the Urban Ring corridor.

Thank you for your cooperation on this important project. We look forward to your response, and we will work with you and your staff to address any questions or issues that arise. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me or David Mohler, Deputy Secretary for Planning, at 617-973-7844.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey B. Mullan
Secretary and Chief Executive Officer

cc: Gregory Bialecki, Secretary, Housing and Economic Development
William Mitchell, Acting Administrator
David Mohler, Executive Director, Office of Transportation Planning
Scott Hamwey, Office of Transportation Planning
Urban Ring Citizens Advisory Committee Members